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# The Eclipse of Daniel's Narrative: The limits of historical knowledge in the theological reading of Daniel

Richard S. Briggs

## ABSTRACT

This article uses Hans Frei's famous image of the 'eclipse' of biblical narrative to explore the link between situating the book of Daniel historically and grasping its theological point(s). The critical/conservative stand-off over the book of Daniel is rehearsed by way of key agenda-setting Victorian voices, and it is then argued that Frei's perspective allows the reader to move on from assessing descriptive accuracy towards focusing on ascriptive purpose(s). Various examples of how such an ascriptive approach might clarify Daniel are considered, including specific attention to the complexities of Daniel 11's problematic relationship to what did and did not happen to Antiochus Epiphanes.

## *1 Setting the Scene: Theological Interpretation of Scripture Today*

The early twenty-first century has seen the tide of theological interpretation rush back in. Those who had become habituated to picking their way through the pebbles on Dover Beach, lamenting the receding roar of the theological voice in the barren lands of exegetical minutiae, were rudely awakened by the unexpected crashing upon the shore of 'the theological interpretation of scripture'. Crowded conference rooms and repristinated publishing schedules attested to this new yet old phenomenon, and the much-touted *rapprochement* between academic biblical studies and serious theological enquiry suddenly found itself not short of programmatic manifestos and aspirational declarations of intent.

Like any incoming tide, this one brings with it signs of life along with evidence of failed projects of the past: the debris of interpretative schemes that rested on dogmatic foreclosure, rather than a proper theological confidence. Among our interpretative forebears, the ghosts of Christians past do not line up neatly all on one side or the other of a map of fruitful exegetical endeavour. Blanket appeals for and against – 'the Church's deposit of faith *must* rule interpretation!'/the text *must* be allowed to speak against the tradition!' – may work as slogans, but do not reflect the overlapping commitments and inter-weaving practices that could characterise good

theological interpretation of scripture in God's economy today. Such all-encompassing perspectives gain what little leverage they have only by operating at some distance from the detailed work of reading specific texts with theological and imaginative energy.

The initial enthusiasm of and for theological interpretation, not to mention various cautious and puzzled voices in response, might now be settling into something calmer and more long-term, where the serious work to be done involves careful theological attention to specific texts. It will take time to determine whether the tide is on its way back out, or can really help to re-draw the map.

The present article attempts to explore one small corner of the map: the extent to which theological concerns in the reading of scripture may recalibrate the nature of our interest in history, or historical reconstruction. Such considerations, when pursued on a conceptual level, often devolve into fruitless generalisations about 'historical criticism' and whether it was 'a Good Thing' or not, *a la 1066 and All That*. There were many aspects to (various) historical criticisms: some were doubtless reductive and problematic for thoughtful attention to scriptural texts, while others were essential for real engagement with writings that come to us from far distant times and cultures. Shorn of sufficient caveats and qualifications, it may be the case that historical criticism, *tout court*, never really existed.<sup>1</sup> Most likely, theological interpretation will also need careful caveats to become a useful category, and in particular its relationship to historical enquiry is unlikely to be either complete antipathy or entirely harmonious integration. Here I will argue that historical contextualisation of the scriptural text is one key element of theological reading, but that this category or 'contextualisation' is looser and less predictable than is sometimes the case in some traditional questions of historical reference or accuracy.

The book of Daniel furnishes us with a range of admirable test cases for such an enquiry, and the specific conceptual tools that facilitate the investigation come from Hans Frei's historical analysis of the nature of biblical interpretation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*.<sup>2</sup> The next section establishes the lie of the land in the interpretation of Daniel, drawing from some of the ways in which the debate was handled in the nineteenth century, for reasons of both rhetorical and conceptual clarity. Then Frei's working conceptualities are introduced and sketched with respect to the questions of theological and

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<sup>1</sup> So Francis Watson, 'Does Historical Criticism Exist? A Contribution to Debate on the Theological Interpretation of Scripture', in R. David Nelson, Darren Sarisky, Justin Stratis (eds.), *Theological Theology. Essays in Honour of John Webster* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 307-18.

<sup>2</sup> Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative. A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974).

historical enquiry. A final section explores how his approach might illuminate the workings of the scriptural book of Daniel with respect to how theological interpretation reframes the nature and scope of historical questions. Daniel may be a particularly clear example, but one would need to be cautious about assuming too quickly that lessons learned here can be applied straightforwardly to other books and kinds of book across the library that is holy scripture. Time, and imaginatively serious interpretation, will tell.

## 2 *The Book of Daniel: Divine or Imposture? A Victorian Vignette*

The Victorians knew how to have fun in their biblical-critical arguments. Scholars of Daniel have some choice selections available. Here is the great E.B. Pusey, stepping up to bat in the 1860's avowedly to oppose 'that tide of scepticism, which the publication of the *Essays and Reviews* let loose upon the young and uninstructed',<sup>3</sup> and holding little back in these much-cited words:

The book of Daniel is especially fitted to be a battle-field between faith and unbelief. It admits of no half-measures. It is either Divine or an imposture. ... The writer, were he not Daniel, must have lied on a frightful scale, ... In a word, the whole book would be one lie in the Name of God.<sup>4</sup>

The climactic essay in *Essays and Reviews* was Benjamin Jowett's celebrated discussion on 'the Interpretation of Scripture Like Any Other Book',<sup>5</sup> a practice of which Jowett was in favour. In essence he proposed a decluttering with 'regard to *a priori* notions about its [scripture's] nature and origin. It is to be interpreted like other books' ... though note that he goes on 'Yet not without a sense that as we read there grows upon us the witness of God in the world, anticipating in a rude and primitive age the truth that was to be ...'.<sup>6</sup>

The rude and primitive response that greeted Jowett persuaded him to turn his hand to other things, but a champion of his cause was Frederic Farrar, who in the Spring of 1885 gave the eight Bampton lectures in the University of Oxford,

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<sup>3</sup> E.B. Pusey, *Daniel the Prophet: Nine Lectures, delivered in the Divinity School of the University of Oxford* (Oxford: James Parker & Co, 1864), iii (cited here from the 1868 second edition).

<sup>4</sup> Pusey, *Daniel the Prophet*, 1. These words open the first lecture of the series.

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin Jowett, 'On the Interpretation of Scripture' in *Essays and Reviews* (London: Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, 7<sup>th</sup> ed, 1861 [orig 1860]), 330-433.

<sup>6</sup> Jowett, 'Interpretation', 404.

subsequently published as *History of Interpretation* – probably the most consistently Whiggish reading of that subject ever set forth.<sup>7</sup> It is an extraordinary book, governed by an understanding of the onward march of human thought through dark ages past and on into new vistas of reason and insight.

This same Farrar duly turned his attention to Daniel in an 1895 commentary, where, to complete our little circle of discourse, he arrived at a discussion of Pusey's concerns. He begins by noting that 'few would venture to use such language in *these* days', and that Pusey's is 'always a perilous style to adopt', before – perhaps inevitably – adopting it forthwith. Thus Pusey's approach 'is founded on an immense and inexcusable anachronism. It avails itself of an utterly false misuse of the words "faith" and "unbelief," by which "faith" becomes a mere synonym for "that which I esteem orthodox," or that which has been the current opinion in ages of ignorance.' He goes on 'Much truer faith may be shown by accepting arguments founded on unbiassed evidence than by rejecting them. And what can be more foolish than to base the great truths of the Christian religion on special pleadings which have now come to wear the aspect of ingenious sophistries, such as would not be allowed to have the smallest validity in any ordinary question of literary or historic evidence?'<sup>8</sup> One almost feels as if Farrar has hereby set up precisely the debate about theological interpretation in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century to which we attended in our introduction.

But what is the point of this Victorian rehearsal of our topic? Three observations may be made here. First, the Victorian period set the terms for many of the major interpretative discussions that dominated 20<sup>th</sup> century biblical-theological scholarship. It may be worth our while to go back and unpick some of the assumptions that have framed these modern debates to see how our options were closed down, and familiar scholarly constraints set in place. Secondly, Farrar, like Jowett before him, believed that attending to the full critical analysis of the textual data would deliver readers to where God wanted them to be. After reviewing 15 'peculiarities of the historical section' of Daniel, he concludes 'No amount of casuistical ingenuity can long prevail to overthrow the spreading conviction that the views of Hengstenberg, Hävernick, Keil, Pusey, and their followers, have been refuted in the light of advancing knowledge—*which is a light kindled for us by God Himself*'.<sup>9</sup> Further, in rounding up his scholarly overview he writes 'The only thing which is acceptable to the God of truth is truth; and since He has given us our reason

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<sup>7</sup> Frederic W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation* (London: MacMillan and Co, 1886).

<sup>8</sup> Farrar, *Daniel*, 41 n.1.

<sup>9</sup> Farrar, *Daniel*, 62, my emphasis.

and our conscience as lights which light every man who is born into the world, we must walk by these lights in all questions which belong to these domains.’<sup>10</sup> In short this is a theological analysis, of sorts, of the necessity for scientific or critical exegesis, call it what you will, in the service of arriving at God’s truth. How that does or does not work – for example how this God is known in the first place – may be the subject of much discussion, but we may take it as at least a modest pointer to the problematic tendency to polarise theological over against historical-critical modes of argumentation, rather than to see them in a more complex relationship of mutual respect.

A third observation is that the spectacle of Pusey vs. Farrar arguing it out over the book of Daniel in the late Victorian age helpfully pre-dates the discoveries of so many of the resources that today furnish the critical debates about Daniel with a wide range of comparative texts and linguistic phenomena. When one turns to the altogether calmer waters of John Collins’s magisterial 1993 *Hermeneia* commentary on Daniel, it is to find that the comparative data that so excited Farrar is catalogued under cautions about how to interpret the data from the Elephantine papyri (published from 1906 onwards), or indeed the Dead Sea Scrolls.<sup>11</sup> Even the few Greek loan words have proved more complex than Farrar thought, and I cannot forebear from mentioning George Foot Moore’s thoughtful *JBL* article concerning the musical instruments of Daniel 3:5 – ‘*Symphonia* not a Bagpipe’, a ten-page *tour de force* that incidentally shows that biblical scholarship is perfectly capable of being both fascinating and entirely unrelated to theological interests.<sup>12</sup> Farrar’s contemporary S.R. Driver, in a much-cited judgment on the date of the book, was able to say: ‘The verdict of the language of Daniel is thus clear ... the Greek words *demand*, the Hebrew *supports*, and the Aramaic *permits*, a date *after the conquest of Palestine by Alexander the Great*’.<sup>13</sup> It is difficult if not impossible to sustain such a judgment today on linguistic grounds alone.<sup>14</sup> But the significance of the Victorian version of the

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<sup>10</sup> Farrar, *Daniel*, 102, where he even continues ‘History, literature and criticism, and the interpretation of human language do belong to the domain of pure reason; and we must not be bribed by the misapplication of hypothetical exegesis to give them up for the support of traditional views which advancing knowledge no longer suffers us to maintain.’ (!)

<sup>11</sup> John J. Collins, *Daniel* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 18-20. The Elephantine papyri date from the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE and represent one of our main sources of ‘official Aramaic’, along with the biblical texts; cf Michael B. Shepherd, *The Verbal System of Biblical Aramaic. A Distributional Approach* (Studies in Biblical Literature 116; New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 43.

<sup>12</sup> George Foot Moore, ‘*Symphonia* not a Bagpipe’, *JBL* 24.2 (1905), 166-75.

<sup>13</sup> S.R. Driver, *The Book of Daniel* (Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1905), lxiii.

<sup>14</sup> See Shepherd, *The Verbal System of Biblical Aramaic*, 43, who concludes that there is too little Greek to draw conclusions, and that similarities between biblical Aramaic and 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE Egyptian

argument is two-fold. First it provides more of a focus on the issues raised by a reading of the text rather than its historical contextualisation, since there is less comparative data in the way. This does offer food for thought regarding what proportion of our interpretive energy is rightly accorded to comparative data, which is often most illuminating on the least theologically relevant aspects of the interpreter's task. As Childs wrote over 30 years ago it is a perplexing phenomenon that the increase in our historical knowledge concerning Daniel has not been matched by increased theological insight.<sup>15</sup> Secondly, by way of comparing the arguments then and now, it turns out that the substantive issues in the reading of Daniel in connection with history may be *nuanced*, but are in fact *neither generated nor controlled* by the precise state of our historical knowledge of the background to the book. These observations prepare the ground for the main argument that follows.

It is with some difficulty that I must tear myself away from this glorious Victorian mode of argument, and prescind from some of Farrar's choicest phrases – 'rash and incompetent assertion', 'slovenly treatises which only serve to throw dust in the eyes of the ignorant'<sup>16</sup> – and turn to today.

### 3 *The Eclipse of Daniel's Narrative*

The long stand-off between so-called critical and so-called conservative approaches to Daniel has revolved around the twin linked questions of authorship and historical accuracy. As is well known, these questions, once posed, proved divisive and highly contentious, with regard to locating the writing of the book in the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, and with regard to a string of high-profile referential issues relating, for example, to the dates of Nebuchadnezzar's arrival in Jerusalem in the book's opening verse; the identity, name, dates or even existence of 'Darius the Mede' (5:31), and so forth. Fighting Pusey's corner were those for whom the truth of the book required accurate historical reference, preferably in the predictive voice of the 6<sup>th</sup> century prophet Daniel. Fighting something like Farrar's corner were those for whom such truth was no longer plausible, whether or not they would have agreed with Farrar that the book was still of the highest theological value as a part of the canon of scripture.

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Aramaic do not allow linguistic considerations to rule out a date as early as the 5<sup>th</sup> century. I think Shepherd's view is a little close to 'one cannot prove it isn't true', but the caution is helpful.

<sup>15</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 613. In fact he added 'One could almost wonder whether there is a reverse ratio'.

<sup>16</sup> Farrar, *Daniel*, 17, 89.

I am not the first to suggest that this depressing scenario is a fight between two options that both slip too quickly past the question of whether biblical texts are helpfully measured as true or not in anything like these terms. To appropriate the peculiarly apt image of Hans Frei's analysis: Daniel's narrative has been eclipsed. The eclipse in question is the shift to the modern framework within which texts are descriptively referential in historical, literal-factual terms. This is more or less what it means to the modern mind to say that a biblical narrative is true: it gets its facts right, and to read it literally is to read it in terms of correspondence between the text and history. As it happens, I have not been able to locate a book or article entitled 'The Quest of the Historical Daniel', but that is what much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century writing on Daniel was. It differed only in whether it returned a positive verdict (after Pusey) or a negative one (after Farrar).

Frei argued that the traditional reading of biblical narratives saw these texts instead as ascriptively referential in realistic, (or what I shall call) literal-literary terms. Here, to read the texts literally was to let the literary texturing of the text carry the reader to wherever the text was going; to 'reality' understood in theological, rather than simply historical, terms. The word 'literal', on this account, had continuity with the old traditional 'literal sense', which might stretch, and not break, as readers wrestled with the theological voice of the text. On another occasion and for other purposes it would be appropriate to explore the ways in which Frei's account is more nuanced than this. For example, he actually claimed that the ascriptive and descriptive were not traditionally distinguished, which is why it is no counter-argument to Frei's thesis that one can find descriptive issues being pondered by pre-modern readers.<sup>17</sup> The titular eclipse of which Frei spoke came when the rise of historical consciousness rent asunder what had previously been put together, i.e. the descriptive and the ascriptive, thereby collapsing the 'real' world into the 'historical' world. Nevertheless, for our present purposes, the basic distinction that we need is that between literal-literary reading and literal-factual reading.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See for example, in the 430's, Theodoret's wondering about the historical identity of Darius the Mede in his commentary, cf 5:31. (cf Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on Daniel* [tr. Robert C. Hill; Writings from the Greco-Roman World 7; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2006], 153-57).

<sup>18</sup> The key framework for Frei's argument is found in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 1-16; but the terminology of 'ascriptive' over against 'descriptive' narrative is elsewhere, notably on pp. 122-23 of his essay 'The "Literal Reading" of the Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does it Stretch or Will it Break?', in his *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays* (eds. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher; New Haven and Oxford: Oxford University Press), 117-52, and perhaps most clearly contrasted in his *Types of Christian Theology* (eds. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 125 (cf also 84).



With regard to the book of Daniel in particular, this distinction makes short work of much of the old critical-conservative stand-off. In terms of historical accuracy understood in factually referential terms, the book of Daniel scores poorly. The dates of 1:1 are inaccurate. Darius the Mede sounds like the satrapy-organising Darius 1 of Persia, relocated in the book's narrative to the time of the death of Belshazzar some 30-40 years too early in 5:30-31. Time after time, on specifics like this, the attempt to construct a seamlessly referential historical garment has simply failed to convince. As Farrar himself observed, it is achieved by a cutting of the cloth to fit that in fact fails to respect the cloth as it is: 'the defenders of Daniel have, during the last few years, been employed chiefly in cutting Daniel to pieces'. Specifically, such approaches fail to receive the text as it actually is.<sup>19</sup>

However, there is a problem with the way this critical analysis is sometimes, indeed usually, pursued. One way of seeing this relates to the consensus move to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE as the time of composition of the book. Many critics follow Farrar in thinking that this kind of temporal distance between author and historical circumstance explains the various perceived inaccuracies of the text: at such a remove they were not to know better. Farrar's version: 'the feeblest reasoner will see that while a writer may easily be accurate in general facts, and even in details, respecting an age long previous to that in which he wrote, the existence of violent errors as to matters with which a contemporary must have been familiar at once refutes all pretence of historic authenticity'.<sup>20</sup> Collins' summary offers a typically more modestly phrased, but substantively similar judgment: 'The historical problems of Daniel 1—6 suggest that these stories were not composed in the sixth century by anyone close to the Babylonian court'.<sup>21</sup> To avoid misrepresentation, we should note that Collins' own view is that one should nevertheless hold back from assigning the tales to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, since they do not reflect any real awareness of the persecution suffered under Antiochus Epiphanes. Collins thus locates the tales in the Hellenistic period, allowing for varying degrees of oral and literary traditioning over time. In this he is surely right that the book was not composed as a literary unity, a position whose last concerted critical defence was that of H.H. Rowley in his 1950 SOTS presidential address, which saw the whole book as a 2<sup>nd</sup> century

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<sup>19</sup> See Farrar, *Daniel*, 27, in fact citing A.A. Bevan, *A Short Commentary on Daniel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1893), 8). One of the most thorough analyses of the cloth-cutting tendencies of conservative apologists for Daniel is still Lester L. Grabbe, 'Fundamentalism and Scholarship: The Case of Daniel', in Barry P. Thompson (ed.), *Scripture: Meaning and Method. Essays Presented to Anthony Tyrrell Hanson* (Hull: Hull University Press, 1987), 133-52.

<sup>20</sup> Farrar, *Daniel*, 44-45.

<sup>21</sup> Collins, *Daniel*, 33.

product.<sup>22</sup> The turn away from compositional unity is doubtless a move in the right direction, though it is probably not a particularly significant move with respect to actual interpretation of the finished book of Daniel.

However, the focal question for our purposes is this: why must anyone think that someone close to the Babylonian court is disqualified as author simply because there are historical (i.e. referential) problems? The assumption that has been allowed to pass here is straightforwardly the mirror-image of the conservative assumption that the book is invested in literal-factual reference, but with the opposite conclusion as to whether it turned out to be successful. Once broaden the frame of hermeneutical possibilities, however, to incorporate a literal-literary or ascriptive function, and it becomes possible to move beyond the 'eclipse' of Daniel's narrative, and indeed it becomes relatively simple to make productive theological use of the book's myriad historical oddities.

#### *4 Locating the Theological Script: Ascriptive Readings of Daniel's (Referential) Strangeness*

The possibility that emerges in ascriptive mode, to use a Frei-inspired short-hand, is that the book of Daniel is entirely successful in what it is seeking to say, 'literally', and that that includes quite a range of historical misinformation and misrepresentation. My own view is that many of the so-called 'problems' of Daniel may be cast into an illuminating fresh light in this manner. This empire-contesting book, in very similar ways to Ezra's epic muddling of the search for imperial decrees in the face of the inveterate record-keepers of the Persian regime, leads readers a merry, but most likely deliberately subversive, dance.

All I can do here is rehearse briefly some highlights of the book's ascriptive strangeness: leading off with the wrong date for Nebuchadnezzar's arrival in Jerusalem; refusing even to get his name right, as it does with most of the Babylonian names that commentators regularly complain are 'corrupted' or 'unknown' in derivation; playing up Belshazzar as a King presiding over chaos rather than a high official (a second-in-command?) stumbling in the dark; lampooning Nebuchadnezzar as beast in a way comparable to what we now know from the prayer of Nabonidus – but to read the average commentary aware of 4QPrNab you would think that this is a complex puzzle in the confusion of historical traditions rather than ascriptive almost-postcolonial scandal-mongering; and mischievously

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<sup>22</sup> H.H. Rowley, 'The Unity of the Book of Daniel', in his *The Servant of the Lord, and other essays on the Old Testament* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1952, 1965) 247-80.

misidentifying Darius in order to keep its readers guessing about questions of power and authority as kingdoms rise and fall (with the conspicuous exception of the one kingdom to which is ascribed an everlasting dominion).<sup>23</sup>

To over-simplify: Farrar was right about history while Pusey was wrong; both claimed that their view alone rescued the theological significance of the book; but both were wrong about *the theological significance of the text's complex relationship to history*. With regard to which of the views does better justice to the theological significance, there is fascinating work to be done on how much difference it actually made – John Goldingay's *Word* commentary on Daniel is in some senses a sustained exercise in defending the view that it 'makes surprisingly little difference to the book's exegesis',<sup>24</sup> and in general terms this is true, perhaps precisely because exegesis might properly attend to the literal sense of the text. 'Surprisingly little' is not 'none', as Goldingay himself is doubtless aware. Perhaps the difference that it does make is when the literal sense includes subversive mis-reference to history. Might it be, ironically, that attention to questions of historical reference has what limited constructive use it does in the reading of the book of Daniel precisely in those cases where factual inaccuracies are in play?

When one comes to Daniel 11 even Goldingay is unable to retain his historical disinterest, because this chapter either makes no sense at all without being construed as some sort of reference to the Ptolemy and Seleucid rulers who followed Alexander the Great (cf 11:4), or it operates in the symbolic wilderness of the heirs of Hal Lindsay, the hermeneutics of which must be for another occasion.

Thus to tease out the theological implications of the eclipse of Daniel's narrative, I wish to conclude with some consideration of the test case of Daniel 11:40-45, which we may for simplicity but with great reservation, call a 'failed prophecy'. The data are relatively straight-forward, and I only summarise them here without justifying the framework in play. The chapter has been concerned with Antiochus IV Epiphanes since his introduction as a 'contemptible person' in v.21; his extraordinary rise (vv.21-24); his various military campaigns against the South (Egypt; vv.25-28); and then his turning his attention to Jerusalem (vv.29-35; by which time we have arrived at the Jewish revolt of 167-164BCE). Verses 36-39 offer a damning character portrait of him, before 11:40-45 describe in grandiose terms a series of military

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<sup>23</sup> All these points need further development, but some aspects of a 'mischievous' reading in chs. 1-6 are close to the engaging analysis of David M. Valeta, *Lions and Ovens and Visions. A Satirical Reading of Daniel 1-6* (HBM 12; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> John E. Goldingay, *Daniel* (WBC 30; Dallas: Word, 1987), xl.

movements and encounters that will see him meet his death, unaided and alone, encamped between the sea and the holy mountain (i.e. in the land of Israel).

Meanwhile, to the best of our knowledge, Antiochus had gone East, and died of some unspecified disease, downcast and wrestling with defeat, in Persia around November 164BCE.<sup>25</sup> The tradition that he died from consumption appears to come from Porphyry's '*mortuus est maerore consumptus*', more simply understood as 'died by grief consumed'.<sup>26</sup>

The datum with which interpreters have to deal is that the end of Antiochus did not come about in the manner or location prophesied. The interpretive options during the eclipse were roughly three: (i) hold on for factual historical reference by deferring 11:40-45 to the end-times; (ii) accept the failure of factual historical reference, and either thereby down-grade the significance or respect to be accorded to this chapter, or defer instead to the value of the picture it offers of prophetic hope or expectation at the time, even if the hope proved unfounded; or (iii) argue that the text does not intend to be prophetic of specific realities, but paints 'an imaginative scenario of the *kind* of issue that must come from present events' and was not attempting to be 'a literal account of events before they take place'.<sup>27</sup> This third option, for which I have cited John Goldingay, is quite clearly the most theologically useful option for this passage within the reading framework where specific prediction correlates to factual fulfilment, since by denying that there is specific prediction, the lack of fulfilment is rendered moot.

The problem with it is that Daniel 11:40-45 reads much more like a genuine and specific prediction than an imaginative scenario. So in essence my solution is to take up the possibilities re-opened by Frei's advocacy of ascriptive reading, and thus to hold together what seems so irreconcilable to the standard views; namely: that Daniel 11:40-45 was indeed specific prediction of as-yet future events concerning Antiochus Epiphanes, which then did not come about, and that despite this (historic) failure the details of the passage still serve a constructive theological purpose. This option needs to take account of some careful nuancing that separates out what the author (or at least the oracle's originator) thought, from what was thought by those

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<sup>25</sup> A helpful review of accounts of his death is Daniel R. Schwartz, 'Why Did Antiochus Have to Fall? (II Maccabees 9:7)?', in Lynn LiDonnici and Andrea Lieber (eds.), *Heavenly Tablets. Interpretation, Identity and Tradition in Ancient Israel* (JSJ Supp 119; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 257-65.

<sup>26</sup> See the useful review of Schwartz, 'Why Did Antiochus Have to Fall?', 258. Porphyry's text is via Jerome's citation of it, translated by Gleason L. Archer as 'being overcome with grief, died' – see [http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/jerome\\_daniel\\_02\\_text.htm](http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/jerome_daniel_02_text.htm) (accessed 8 Feb 2016). (Porphyry was a neoplatonic philosopher, 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, whose *Against the Christians* is known only through Jerome's 4<sup>th</sup> century refutations.)

<sup>27</sup> Goldingay, *Daniel*, 305.

who gathered the prophecy into the canonical account. What the *author* got wrong (or possibly the pre-literary prophet if one there was) is a separate issue from error in the perspective of whoever's decisions it was to include the text in the book; and then the book in the canon – all of which may have occurred quite quickly. It is not hard to imagine the book being put together after it was already known that events had not worked out in the way predicted. But this is largely imponderable: we simply do not know. In a stimulating study Ulrike Mittmann-Richert has suggested that this problem is even being addressed as early as the Additions to Daniel: that these represent a theological response to the pressing question of what to do in light of Daniel's prophecies not coming true, but though this sheds much light on a potential reading of the Additions, her brief study does not attend much to questions about how to read specific Daniel passages, and only briefly mentions 11:40-45.<sup>28</sup> The implications of such considerations for how one reads the original Daniel texts may be put like this: does one end up saying that (a) the author was wrong but the compiler was already moving to a non-factual level, anticipating a subsequent hermeneutical move that readers might make; or (b) both author and compiler look forward expectantly, but turn out to be wrong, and it is up to the reader to make the hermeneutical move. (b) is perhaps a harder case, so let us assume it in what follows.

To put the issue as simply as I can, perhaps over-simply: how does the descriptive falsehood of Daniel 11:40-45 serve its ascriptive truth? Or, how does its historical inaccuracy act as a vehicle for its realistic accuracy? Note that we simply have not had the right conceptual tools even to ask these questions during the eclipse.

Let me offer just one suggestion for how this might work out, for which I am indebted to the provocation of Sylvie Honigman's striking reading of history in the light of the socio-political rhetoric of 1 and 2 Maccabees in her *Tales of High Priests and Taxes*.<sup>29</sup> Part of Honigman's overall thesis is that 1 and 2 Maccabees are both books informed by a standard ancient narrative pattern concerning temple foundation, or as is most pertinent to our case, refoundation,<sup>30</sup> and as she notes one of the main focal points of Daniel 11's account of Antiochus does of course concern

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<sup>28</sup> See Ulrike Mittmann-Richert, 'Why has Daniel's Prophecy not been fulfilled? The Question of Political Peace and Independence in the Additions to Daniel', in Kristin De Troyer and Armin Lange (eds.), *Reading the Present in the Qumran Library. The Perception of the Contemporary by Means of Scriptural Interpretations* (SBL Symposium Series 30; Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 103-123; though see her brief comments at 105.

<sup>29</sup> See Sylvie Honigman, *Tales of High Priests and Taxes. The Books of the Maccabees and the Judean Rebellion against Antiochos IV* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2014).

<sup>30</sup> Honigman, *Tales of High Priests and Taxes*, 38 and throughout.

the desecration of the temple altar.<sup>31</sup> There is a great deal of debate at the moment about the congruity or otherwise of the Maccabees accounts with what we know in general of Seleucid foreign policy – the jury is not so much out as fully divided. Honigman thinks that Seleucid foreign policy did not in general include religious persecution, which is itself a category that needs careful handling with respect to 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE political conceptualities, and thus Antiochus' undeniable persecution was probably not focused around such matters, polemical accounts notwithstanding. More political/postcolonial approaches read Daniel's apocalyptic as rooted in reaction to the terrors of Seleucid military oppression.<sup>32</sup> But in my judgment Honigman is at least able to show that historical reconstruction cannot proceed without reference to the symbolic nature of each narrative's construction of the world in the terms it ascribes. The account of the build-up to Antiochus' death in 1 Maccabees (6:8-13) emphasises his dying far from home, in retribution for his desecrating the temple and ordering a massacre in Jerusalem.<sup>33</sup> But, and this is surely a significant detail, Daniel 11 envisages Antiochus dying 'between the sea and the beautiful holy mountain' (11:45), i.e. in the land: it is a different (ascriptive) symbolic construction of what his death represents. Is the book of Daniel thereby claiming that reality is truly grasped when we see that the man who has struck at the temple, at the heart of the land, will find that the land in turn defeats him?

To talk of 'what the book of Daniel claims' returns us to the complexities of separating out authors, editors, compilers, and canonical includers. We are in the murky area of what Childs called, notoriously, 'canonical intentionality'.<sup>34</sup> At stake is the distinction noted above in my (a) and (b) – the weaker and stronger cases of whether the editors *et al* were already adjusting for failure, or whether we the readers are compelled to rethink. On this latter, harder, case: the point is that the text is descriptively wrong, but ascriptively true, and the relevant truth of the matter is that the land defeats those who attempt to defeat the land. That this may work itself out in the case of Antiochus Epiphanes by way of death by consumption in the far East, if that is what happened, is interesting, but not determinative of how to read

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<sup>31</sup> Honigman, *Tales of High Priests and Taxes*, 401.

<sup>32</sup> Thus for the complete opposite presentation to that of Honigman see Anthea E. Portier-Young, *Apocalypse Against Empire. Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), e.g. 176-216. Sadly she does not address 11:40-45 in her account.

<sup>33</sup> Honigman, *Tales of High Priests and Taxes*, 220-21.

<sup>34</sup> See Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM, 1979), 79: 'irrespective of intentionality the effect of the canonical process was to render the tradition accessible to the future generation by means of a "canonical intentionality", which is coextensive with the meaning of the biblical text.' Subsequent critics (notably James Barr) have worried away at what this means precisely.

Daniel 11:40-45 as scriptural text. Frequent themes in the book of Daniel: you can assault the temple; you can mistreat its holy vessels; you can enforce devotion to false gods; you can set yourself or your own sacrifices up in God's place ... but you will not — *in the end, as it were* — succeed. Of course readers may dissent from these estimations, but the fact that in any given case they are not historically accurate is not the point at issue. They are true of the world (indeed the beautiful land) into which the text invites its readers. Ascriptive reading remains an option, or perhaps we should say: now re-emerges as an option on the far side of the eclipse of biblical narrative.

### ***Conclusion***

Theological interpretation should be deeply invested in historical contextualisation of scriptural texts, but not because it needs to discern certain forms of historical reference. The exercise of disciplined historical imagination delivers us to the point where we may begin to look for ascriptive readings, after Hans Frei. The critical-conservative stand-off over the book of Daniel was a thing marvellous in its own eyes, but it has had its time, times, and half a time. We should seal it up (for the time of the end, when perhaps we might even know something of what happened?), and return to the pursuit of that perennially much more interesting topic: what the text really says.

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